

Back to skills: redressing current and emerging skills shortages in rural industries

A summary of the final report of the Rural Industry Task Force for 2001 - 2003

In 2001 the Rural Industry Task Force was established as an industry led initiative through the Australian Government's National Industry Skills Initiative (NISI) to help combat skills and labour shortages in rural industries. In 2004 the Task Force reviewed its final report on activities for 2001 – 2003 to highlight major achievements and identify priority areas requiring further attention and action, which may be pursued under the Australian Government's new National Skills Shortages Strategy and other skills and training initiatives.

The Task Force focused particularly on areas such as:

- improving rural industry's understanding of skills shortages and skills development issues
- identifying resources available for skills development activities
- endorsing or initiating activities to improve career information services
- helping to better attune the vocational education system to the needs of rural industry.

It is currently exploring options to expand the scope of skills development strategies, to help existing workers as well as new entrants. It has highlighted the critical task of assisting rural industry sectors recover from the drought, and 80,000 drought-related job losses.

Encouragingly despite a 10% decline in the total number of people employed in the agriculture employment division from 438,300 in May 2000 to 391,700 in August 2002, the number of rural and related traineeships and apprenticeships has actually increased significantly, by 35% over the four year period 1999-00 – 2002-03. This increase demonstrates that many rural industry sectors have progressively accepted New Apprenticeship pathways and opportunities as a legitimate and valuable means of ensuring appropriate skill and industry development.

The Task Force believes that it is important that rural and related New Apprenticeship commencements be encouraged and closely monitored during drought recovery. Pressure must be maintained on State and Territory Governments to appropriately resource New Apprenticeships training delivery.

The Task Force has been able to achieve many of its objectives, thanks in large part to the involvement of rural industry representatives and other contributors to the opportunities made possible under the NISI process. This valuable industry participation needs to continue during the drought recovery phase, while rural industries work to further target and address emerging skills and labour shortages. The Task Force readily acknowledges that little would have been achieved without the valuable support, including funding assistance, provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

Task Force activities were guided by the Rural Industry Action Plan, developed by industry in 2001 under the National Industry Skills Initiative, that focused on the following key areas: -

Key area 1 – marketing and promotion

The Task Force oversaw the development of a range of marketing materials aimed at increasing the awareness of career and training opportunities in rural and related industries.

The ONtrack project

The most successful Task Force activity was the development and production of a suite of modern and attractive materials promoting rural careers. These materials include:

- an interactive careers CD-Rom called *ONtrack: Real skills rural future*
- a website: www.ruralskills.com.au/ontrack
- related promotions material.

The original ONtrack CD-Rom highlighted the diverse career and employment opportunities in rural and related industries and included 15 video case studies of people working in various sectors.

When first developed in May 2002, over 7,000 ONtrack CD-Roms were distributed to high schools, Centrelink offices, libraries, farmer organisations, New Apprenticeship Centres, registered training organisations and government departments. A further 800 were sent to individuals on request over the next 12 months.

The quality and success of the CD-Rom encouraged private sector and industry contributions to fund the development of an updated version that included five additional video case studies. Since its release in May 2003, a further 4,000 copies have been distributed. The updated version provides insights into careers in Viticulture – grape growing, Wine production, Meat Processing, Rural Services, Cropping and Grains, Cotton Classing, Beef Production, Sheep and Wool, Shearing, Pigs, Dairy, Fruit and Vegetables, Aquaculture, Turf, Nursery, Parks and Gardens, Agronomy, Animal Care and the Environment.

The ONtrack materials have received positive feedback from industry representatives, industry associations, schools and individual career advisers. It should prove a valuable tool for promoting industry careers in the coming years. Copies of the ONtrack materials are still available from Rural Skills Australia, contact 1800 647 798.

The Task Force strongly recommends that industry further develop and implement strategies to inform career advisers, parents and students of rural career opportunities.

Development of a national marketing strategy

The Task Force endorsed a national marketing strategy developed by Rural Skills Australia (RSA), aimed at raising awareness of training and employment opportunities within rural industries. The strategy involved the national development and distribution of information, products and materials through the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), its member bodies, the rural press, various government agencies, and other key stakeholders.

While considering the strategy, the Task Force recommends that industry consider options for mid to longer-term awareness raising activities, perhaps with a special focus on particular regions or industry sectors.

Promotional materials

The Task Force oversaw a range of promotional activities undertaken by RSA to encourage greater rural industry participation in New Apprenticeships, including:

- an upgrade of the Rural Skills Australia website www.ruralskills.com.au
- the maintenance of an 1800 freecall facility for enquiries
- the promotion of New Apprenticeships through:
 - tri-fold brochures
 - static display panels
 - resource kits
 - employer guides on New Apprenticeships.

Key area 2 – developing young people for careers in rural industry

The Task Force also encouraged the development of improved school to industry links so that young people can more easily make the transition from school to further training or work in rural industries. It has also supported the wider dissemination of available career information and advice, particularly in relation to rural and related New Apprenticeships.

Involving state farmer associations

For a number of years the NFF had identified problems with school-to-work pathways for rural industries. The Task Force, working closely with the NFF, encouraged state farmer associations to do more to address these deficiencies. Rural project officers employed with funding assistance from the Australian Government, provided through the Department of Education, Science and Training, have been working to improve the perception of rural careers in schools and improve school to work transition arrangements for rural industries. These officers have been involved with initiatives such as structured workplace learning, work experience and school-based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs).

The Task Force feels that school-to-work transition programs need further improvement and expansion, and that related promotional activity should be ongoing.

School-based New Apprenticeships

Undoubtedly Australian Government support for SBNAs has helped rural industry attract young people into rural careers. The Task Force welcomed Australian Government increases to Business Incentives

available to employers of SBNA and the relaxation of prior qualifications exemption rules in respect of SBNA qualifications.

The Golden Circle Ltd 'Kid Start Farms' program has been the highlight of rural industry involvement with SBNA. Over the last five years almost 250 employers of rural and related SBNA around Australia have received a special Golden Circle employer incentive. The Task Force would welcome more industry contributions of this kind.

Key area 3 – making New Apprenticeships work for industry

The Task Force has sought to increase industry participation in the Australian Government's New Apprenticeships program by:

- pursuing the introduction of cross-industry New Apprenticeships pathways
- exploring options to strengthen the role of Group Training Organisations in rural and related industries
- marketing and promoting rural careers to both young people and the wider community.

Cross-industry New Apprenticeships

Cross-industry New Apprenticeships allow for the combination of competencies from different training packages. This initiative was originally developed to help seasonal workers find year-round employment across a variety of industry sectors. It was hoped that it would also provide for increased Group Training Organisation involvement with rural industries, assist rural industry address skills shortages, and enable employers and employees to use a wider range of skills.

Cross-industry New Apprenticeships, originally piloted by Group Training Australia in 2002/03, are progressively being adopted across States and Territories, since the endorsement of the Rural Operations qualifications as part of the new Rural Production Training Package.

The Task Force recommends that more be done to assist those who work seasonally across a number of industry sectors, and that industry and Group Training Australia review the pilot outcomes and identify opportunities for additional Group Training Organisation involvement with rural and related industries.

Supporting rural New Apprenticeships

Industry has clearly become more aware of the value and validity of New Apprenticeships pathways as viable recruitment and skills development options. However, due to the drought, the number of apprenticeship commencements in 2002-03 was down 5.7% on the previous year (following two years of significant increases).

The Australian Government has looked to address this decline by relaxing the eligibility requirements for aspects of the program and increasing financial support to both employers and employees. The Task Force has welcomed these developments including the introduction of a special Rural and Regional Skills Shortages New Apprenticeships incentive of \$1,100; and encourages employers to use the range of assistance available under the Australian Government's incentives programme.

Group Training Initiatives

The Australian Government has a number of initiatives to promote and support New Apprenticeships for young people with specific needs. For example, the Joint Group Training program provides about \$20 million a year in federal and state/territory funding for groups such as young people in regional, rural and remote areas.

The Task Force believes that it would be useful for rural industry to learn more about the Joint Group Training program opportunities and identify options for expanding Group Training Organisation involvement with rural industries, particularly as the drought breaks.

Key Area 4 – attuning the VET system to the training needs of rural industry

The Task Force has been involved in a number of activities to better attune vocational education and training (VET) to industry needs. These have included:

- encouraging the Commonwealth and State/Territory funded FarmBis programme and private sector training initiatives to link training program development activities with Training Package competencies, where available
- identifying and following up on the training needs of seasonal workers
- encouraging the development and adoption of accessible and cost effective skills recognition procedures.

Improving the skills of farmers

The Rural Industry Action Plan highlighted deficiencies in many farmers' business planning and staff recruitment and retention skills, and their understanding of the importance of training.

The Task Force played a critical role in overseeing the development and distribution of two information kits - *Good Times/Hard Times* and *Farm Recruitment* for primary producers, with funding assistance provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Education, Science and Training. Both kits contained a magazine and an interactive CD-Rom. Since their release, nearly 10,000 copies of both kits have been distributed through the NFF and its member bodies. The information is also available through the Rural Skills Australia website www.ruralskills.com.au.

The Task Force believes these kits should receive continued promotion, and that they could be used as a model to guide the development of other training resources for farmers.

Linking training initiatives with training packages

The Task Force has encouraged bodies that fund training program development activities to include requirements to link with Training Package competencies, where available, as this will improve the ability of participants to achieve formal recognition of the skills acquired through those programs. A notable achievement was that the Australian Government's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry amended its FarmBis Programme funding guidelines to promote a closer alignment to training packages and units of competency, where they are available.

The Task Force strongly recommends that developers of training programs and courses for farmers be required to link them to endorsed Training Packages and units of competency (where these are available). It would be helpful if industry continued to promote this requirement to government and non-government bodies that fund training course development.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Farmers are more likely to become involved in training if it is easy and affordable for them to have their existing skills recognised. The Task Force has sought to encourage the development of user friendly RPL processes.

Although there have been some successful programs piloting RPL processes in rural industries involving several hundred farmers in Queensland and Victoria, progress overall has been slow in this area and more needs to be done. The Task force recommends that new approaches for promoting RPL processes should be sought, especially for people not seeking full qualifications.

Key areas 5 – addressing skills gaps and shortages

The Task Force has sought to address skills gaps and shortages through a variety of strategies including the:

- development and promotion of improved career models and skills pathways
- promotion of up-skilling opportunities and existing worker New Apprenticeships
- development of training products and materials.

The Harvest Trail service

The Australian Government's Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has established a National Harvest Labour Information Service to provide information and employment related services to growers and primary producers around Australia.

The Task Force recommends that the NFF monitor and provide feedback to the department on the effectiveness of the service.

Engaging other training organisations

Rural Skills Australia has developed and distributed marketing and information kits to New Apprenticeships Centres, Registered Training Organisations and Group Training Organisations. The kits aim to raise the awareness of rural and related New Apprenticeship pathways. These approaches were supported with funding provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training.

Given high staff turnover rates within many of these organisations, the Task Force sees a continuing need to maintain the production and wide distribution of the kits and that in future it might be useful to develop materials that target the needs of particular sectors and regions.

Training package review

Industry, through the Rural Training Council of Australia has contributed to the Australian National Training Authority's High Level Review of Training Packages. Also, over the last three years several rural and related training packages have been produced, redeveloped or upgraded to ensure the availability of relevant and up-to-date units of competency, skills and qualifications within industry sectors through the Rural Production, Amenity Horticulture, Conservation and Land Management, and Animal Care and Management National Training Packages.

Although the Task Force recognises the benefit of including generic competencies in rural and related Training Packages, it also believes that industry requires assistance to develop customised learning support materials to meet the needs of individual sectors.

The Task Force believes that both industry and the national training system would benefit greatly from improved and streamlined endorsement processes for Training Packages, and that the Australian National Training Authority or its replacement should simplify current processes to allow for minor amendments to existing Training Packages in a timely way.

Further information

A PDF version of the full report on the Task Force's activities can be viewed or downloaded from the following websites www.ruralskills.com.au or www.getatrade.gov.au.

Rural Skills Australia

2nd Floor NFF House
14-16 Brisbane Avenue
BARTON ACT 2600
Free call: 1800 647 798
Facsimile: 02 6273 7364
Web: www.ruralskills.com.au

National Farmers' Federation

3rd Floor NFF House
14-16 Brisbane Avenue
BARTON ACT 2600
Telephone: 02 6273 3855
Facsimile: 02 6273 2331
Web: www.nff.org.au